

Mainstream Modern

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Mainstream Modern began as a photographic hobby and has developed over the last twenty years to become a full-blown project, and identity, in its own right. It is supplementary to my core academic writing, but intrinsic to its production. Here I explain how my website came to be and how my enthusiasm for the built environment of the latter half of the twentieth century became research. In this reflection I am obliged to acknowledge those who have helped and influenced my work. A number of individuals have proffered salient advice and extended arms of friendship that have been both pivotal and paramount to the roots and routes of this journey, and it would be an offence not to name them here.ⁱ

In 1996, armed with a cheap Samsung compact camera, loaded with my first black and white film I spent a day in Manchester shooting concrete structures [Figure 1]. My tutor, Tom Jefferies, suggested that I should also spend some time on the dock road in Liverpool, a place with which I was familiar. I have been fascinated by infrastructure since I was a child. We lived in Lancashire, my grandmother lived near to the docks in Bootle and my paternal grandparents lived near to Leeds, which meant frequent journeys along the highly engineered M62 motorway. The bridges over the cuttings in the Pennines [Figure 2] and the massive dam at Scammonden Reservoir were landmarks in my formative years.

Not long after I began taking photographs of concrete I realised that much of the built environment of the mid-century was being demolished or altered and not many appeared to care. I had some half-baked idea about making a book of the most brutal objects I could find on my travels around the north-west of England and set about

making as significant photographic record as my limited skills and mobility would allow. I press ganged a friend to chauffeur me around Greater Manchester using Dennis Sharp's 1969 architectural guide to the city, *Manchester*, as our map.ⁱⁱ I found many buildings already vanished, including a laboratory designed by Serge Chermayeff for ICI in Blackley – which was demolished in the late 1980s. The only reference I could find to it was in Alan Powers' book.ⁱⁱⁱ It struck me that, for an émigré architect of such significance to have designed a building in Manchester and the record of it to be so scarce, there must be many more situations like it. Unfortunately, not only was it buildings of the mid-century that were, to my mind, under appreciated, it was also buildings in provincial settings that were largely ignored by scholars and interest groups, whose focus at the time seemed to be London and the south-east. Without a publisher, nor any real idea of what I was doing, I continued hunting buildings every week. Sometimes I was guided by others and sometimes I would simply happen upon something, photograph it and then do some research to find out more. It was a hobby driven by fascination, but I thought it was worthwhile.

My primary interest was the apparently un-designed. The anonymous architecture of substations, water towers, telephone exchanges, transformer stations, gasometers, pump houses and other pieces of infrastructure enthralled me as an adult as much as they had been imbibed as a child. That many of these were produced in the modernising fervour of the post-war period and aligned with my interest in the 'real' architecture of mainstream British modernism did have some personal relevance. I was also a fan of the graphics and logos of nationalised utility and transport companies and the designers of these were less anonymous. Their training was more explicitly bound in a classic mode, augmented by a drive towards new, modern forms. Now, I realise that the same was happening in architectural education in Britain, many schools were teaching the classics as students erred towards the contemporary and it was this mix of old and new,

foundation and imagination, that was part of the forging of the wide, and late, adoption of modernism in Britain. I had made as many, if not more, images of functional and industrial buildings and graphics as I had conventional buildings and it was these that I first wanted to find a way to publish.

A friend, Geoff Bretherick, had just finished a Masters degree in programming at Salford University and I approached him with an idea for a website. He built me a fantastic site with a content management system that I could control, input new images and create datasets; we launched it as manctransit.co.uk in 2005 [Figure 3]. I was able to make sets of buildings and infrastructure like 'pedestrian transfer' and populate them with images of subways, bridges over motorways and those odd aerial walkways that were built in tandem with elevated urban motorways – niche, but personally satisfying. It was built in Adobe Flash and can still be accessed with old machines running the Windows 98 operating system, but is otherwise digitally decaying – it's as if it has a digital half-life. I've still got the majority of the original files and could republish somewhere one day, but times move on and new projects always fill the void.

My photography of buildings within the boundary of the former Greater Manchester County continued, still without either publisher or true structure, until I received two great pieces of advice. The first came from a colleague at Building Design Partnership in Manchester, Ken Moth. Ken was a conservation architect and remains a very active member of the Victorian Society. He saw what I was up to and where my interests lay and suggested that I should join the Twentieth Century Society; I did so. The second was from a friend, Julie Fitzpatrick. Julie was teaching at Liverpool School of Architecture and forwarded an e-mail circular that advocated the virtues of grant applications to the RIBA Research Trust. I spent a few days putting mine together for an award of £5000 and it truly focussed my speculative research hobby into a deliverable project with

defined limits. I was lucky enough to be one of the recipients and thus organised myself accordingly to write and format a report to reflect the research that had emerged as a product of my photographic endeavours.

Not only did the RIBA award concretise my aims, it was a defining factor in my appointment at the Manchester School of Architecture. My first full year as an academic allowed me to extend and complete a version of the project, titled *Manchester Modern: The Shape of the City*. As well as a gazetteer of 95 modern buildings I wrote 35,000 words about the genesis of the *City of Manchester Plan 1945* and why it was never realised as imagined by City Surveyor, Rowland Nicholas. I was author, proof reader, copy editor and typesetter, without any formal training in any of these skills, nor the academic networks to seek feedback and advice. Inevitably, the published volume was peppered with faults and the occasional historical inaccuracy. However, it was the first document to deal with the architecture and planning of the period in the region and led on to many more associations and projects. I made 20 hard copies in the form of a paperback A4 book, which were given to friends, family, colleagues and libraries.^{iv}

During the production of *Manchester Modern* I had written several short articles for magazines and websites and these began to create opportunities for collaboration as others with interest got in touch. Most significantly an enquiry by Martin Dodge from the geography department at the University of Manchester, about my work on the architecture and planning of the former UMIST campus, led to a working partnership that continues and has produced symposia, journal articles, exhibitions and walking tours. The Manchester Modernist Society also contacted me about a concrete sculptural wall on the edge of said campus that I had submitted for listing in 2008. It was one of the subjects of their early blog posts following their formation and, once we were associated, they invited me to act as an advisor to the Society. This in turn has led to

innumerable events where I have been able to disseminate my research to an avid and faithful bunch of followers that the Modernist Society has galvanised in the interests of celebrating the art, architecture and culture of the twentieth century, predominantly in places that are not London. This is important to state, as the prevailing narratives of British post-war modernism tend to orientate to the capital, to the Architectural Association, to the welfare state and its Whitehall genesis and sometimes to places as far away as Hertfordshire! There are many more architectural histories outside of the south-east that have nothing to do with any of these established positions. The buildings produced were often not remarkable, almost typical. This does not mean that they are not relevant to either architectural or social and cultural history. It is often the position of post-war modern buildings as 'mainstream' that makes them easy to ignore or to denigrate - it is just this fact that makes them interesting to me. I have been lucky enough to indulge myself in writing about the logo of the GMPTE, concrete police stations and plastic classrooms in Lancashire, antenna towers of the UK microwave backbone network and other rare-groove subcomponents of mainstream modernism.^v

The original notion of publishing a guidebook never left my mind. I know what impact Sharp's modest publication made on me and hoped to leave a similar humble but effective legacy through the activities and legwork I had put in. I have visited most of the 95 buildings in the RIBA study at least three times, once to scout and then two, or more, return visits for the right daylight conditions for photographs suitable for publication. If you add the act of photography to the journal search, recovery of articles, interviews, picture editing and writing it is easy to imagine that each building case study is four or five days of work. Multiplied by the number of buildings then it is easy to see this truly as years of production – it doesn't feel like that. One opportunity to produce the guidebook presented itself via an academic publisher and I asked my friend Vaseem Bhatti to prepare some typical layouts [Figure 4] and a material specification. We

imagined it as a field guide, like airplane spotters had, but, it was the suggestion of 111 special editions in a GRP concrete cover that made the commissioning editor baulk and it never quite came to be.^{vi}

Reverting to known methods, I again asked Geoff if he was willing to code a new site for me, more complex than *manctransit* and with more features and information for the reader. He'd done the same for other mutual friends and I think that the creative in him was somehow satisfied by having these challenging projects – I guess there's beauty and creativity in code too, but cannot profess to know enough to understand. The name of the site was important as I wanted it to represent this 'not London' notion and the normal, everyday and municipal aspects of the buildings I was photographing and writing about. My dad came up with a strong idea, *excapita*, which we ran with as the working title for more than a year. Eventually it was rejected as I'm not actually anti-London and have shot more than my fair share of stuff down there. *Mainstream Modern* is a bastardisation, or extension, of a term first employed by Rayner Banham to describe the wide adoption of the International Style in the 1940s and 1950s, and came about as I was reading for my PhD and in discourse with my supervisor, Professor Mark Crinson. It is an important term in my thesis and one that really captured my views and developing area of specialism. I take it to mean any built object in the modern idiom, whether of the avant-garde or a million miles away, thus absolutely delimiting the scope of my endeavour; which is as daunting as it is liberating. The website *mainstreammodern.co.uk* captures a tiny part of the work I have undertaken and is a live project that I continue to update and add to.

When commissioning the site I was clear that I not only wanted to publish photographs and archive image material, but that I also wanted to be able to geolocate the buildings, provide references and to navigate the site through different classifications: architect,

year, typology and location. I wanted some visual coding of this too and the front page is a live info-graphic of just these data sets – it adjusts each time I make a new entry [Figure 5]. I can add case studies and can host any number in a state of editing towards completion. This is not a piece of academic research in its own right, but it is a way of disseminating certain aspects to a wider public. It therefore reflects my interests: Cruickshank & Seward are very well represented because they are the major subject of my PhD thesis which explores the relationship between architecture and the state in post-war Britain [Figure 6]. Other writings about Roger Booth, Lancashire County Architect and the under celebrated modernism of Peter Womersley have informed the visits I have made and photographs produced, and these will be my next big additions to the site. Collecting and categorising things is an endeavour that satisfies my inner nerd. I like to pretend it's somehow cool, and this has been endorsed by the rise in popularity of modernism, especially brutalism. I suspect that soon it won't be fashionable at all and the collection and I will return to a form of niche obscurity in a forgotten corner of the web. Before that happens I have managed to carve out my first virtual identity in a foray into social media as *mainstream_modern* on Instagram [Figure 7]. It has become a portal to my main site, but has somewhat taken over in terms of the hours dedicated. The instant gratification of 200+ 'likes' from 7,500 followers is heady and addictive and it is easy to understand the popularity of the app. I have also found new information and gathered a number of interesting anecdotes from exchanges through the direct messaging function. The sense that many others appreciate the things you do is valuable too – in 1996 I felt like a loner, in itself perversely gratifying, but hard to sustain when one of the motivating factors is a sense of doing something worthwhile.

I'm not a preservationist, or a conservationist, I'm definitely a hobbyist and have been fortunate enough to follow a passion into a situation where I have been acknowledged as an expert in a particular field. Photography was my route to this journey, and naïve

and unskilled as I was, I have also been lucky enough to count film maker Michael England amongst my friends and his advice about what camera I should purchase next to fulfil my aims has been invaluable. I'm not precious about what I shoot with, but it has been a rare event that I have been without a camera at any turn. I regularly used to carry a Lowe backpack with at least two cameras before the iPhone 5S was released. I now receive invitations to speak, participate in academic networks and to contribute to seminars, and journals. *Mainstream Modern* began as a passion and has evolved to become a project, sometimes peripheral to others, sometimes central to my being, that spans 20 years to date and is unlikely to wain, as my passion for architecture, be it extremely normal or extremely special, remains as it was when I pressed the shutter on the very first shot.

ⁱ There are three people who don't feature by name in the narrative without whom I would have been unable to do what I do – Mum, Dad and Nina. We had about 4 holidays a year when I was young and until I was 12 they were all in the UK. I can't count how many burial mounds, stone circles, Romanesque churches, reservoirs and pillboxes we visited, but the legacy is clear.

ⁱⁱ Sharp, D. (1969) *Manchester. City Buildings Series* (London: Studio Vista)

ⁱⁱⁱ Powers, A. (2001) *Serge Chermayeff: Designer, Architect, Teacher* (London: RIBA Publications)

^{iv} Research Award report for 2010 by Richard Brook: *Manchester Modern: the shape of the city*, 2010, 1 volume (309 p), typescript, illus. RIBA Archive ref. ReAw/Brook.

^v Brook, R. & Dodge, M., 2015. 'Cold War Concrete: Engineering the Airwaves', *The Modernist*, 14, 30-33; Brook, R., 2012 'Police Brutality', *The Modernist*, 4, 12-15; Brook, R., 2011. 'Boldly Gone', *The Modernist*, 1, 10-11.

^{vi} The publication may still happen, I have not quite given it up yet.